

TESTIMONY OF NICK LOWERY¹

THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

AUGUST 1ST, 2002

OVERSIGHT HEARING ON *PROBLEMS FACING NATIVE YOUTH*^{*}

MR CHAIRMAN, I AM TRULY HONORED TO HAVE BEEN ASKED TO SPEAK BEFORE YOU TODAY. I WANT TO COMMEND YOUR VISION AND LEADERSHIP IN ORGANIZING THESE HEARINGS, AND IN CHALLENGING YOUR COLLEAGUES TO HELP CALL ON THE LIMITLESS POTENTIAL OF INDIAN YOUTH.

WE'VE ALL HEARD THE NUMBERS CONCERNING NATIVE YOUTH – WE ALREADY KNOW THEY CONFRONT THE POOREST SOCIOECONOMIC, EDUCATIONAL AND HEALTH REALITIES OF ANY POPULATION IN THE UNITED STATES. THE DEATH RATES FOR AMERICAN INDIAN YOUTH AGES 0-25 ARE 3 TIMES THAT OF ALL U.S. ETHNIC GROUPS, WHILE ALMOST HALF OF ALL INDIANS ARE UNDER TWENTY YEARS OF AGE. NINE TEENAGERS COMMITTED SUICIDE ON THE WHITE MOUNTAIN APACHE RESERVATION LAST YEAR – OUT OF A YOUTH POPULATION OF 6,000. WHAT CAN WE DO AS A PRESCRIPTION AGAINST SUCH HOPELESSNESS?

¹ 2001-2002 *NATION BUILDING FOR NATIVE YOUTH FELLOW* FOR THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AND CO-FOUNDER, *NATIVE VISION*. *NATIVE VISION* (WWW.NATIVEVISION.ORG), NOW IN ITS SEVENTH YEAR, IS A SPORTS AND LIFE-SKILLS PARTNERSHIP FOR NATIVE YOUTH WITH THE NFL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION AND JOHNS HOPKINS CENTER FOR AMERICAN INDIAN HEALTH, RECOGNIZED BY GENERAL COLIN POWELL AS *AMERICA'S PROMISE* FOREMOST NEW PROGRAM FOR NATIVE YOUNG PEOPLE. MR LOWERY HAS WORKED ON THE WHITE HOUSE STAFFS OF PRESIDENTS REAGAN IN THE DRUG ABUSE POLICY OFFICE, AND IS THE ONLY AMERICAN TO WORK FOR PRESIDENT GEORGE BUSH AND PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON IN THE OFFICE OF NATIONAL SERVICE, PROMOTING *THE POINTS OF LIGHT FOUNDATION* AND *AMERICORPS*. HE IS A 2001 NOMINEE TO THE NFL HALL OF FAME.

LET ME SUMMARIZE MY KEY POINTS:

- (1) PROGRAMS LIKE *NATIVE VISION*, *UNITY* AND THE NEW *LIFESKILLS CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP*² ARE CRUCIAL TO ACCELERATING THE INITIATION PROCESS OF NATIVE YOUTH INTO ADULT ROLES SERVING THEIR COMMUNITIES.**

- (2) YOUTH EMPOWERMENT, HOWEVER, MUST BE RAISED TO A WHOLLY NEW LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE: TRIBAL COUNCILS MUST INCORPORATE YOUTH PROGRAMS INTO THE HEART OF TRIBAL GOVERNANCE AND CULTURE. FOR EXAMPLE, THE GILA RIVER YOUTH COUNCIL, HARVARD'S 2002 *HONORING NATIONS* HIGH HONORS AWARDEE, GIVES YOUTH A PERMANENT VOICE, OFFICE AND 100% SUPPORT FROM THE TRIBAL COUNCIL. *NATION BUILDING FOR NATIVE YOUTH* AND SIMILAR TRAINING PROGRAMS ARE ESSENTIAL TO CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN THE ASPIRATION TO LEAD AND SERVE AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SO.**

- (3) A *MCCAIN-BAYH AMERICORPS BILL* CAN PROVIDE THE CRUCIAL INVESTMENT IN THESE NEW NATIVE YOUTH LEADERSHIP AND SELF-GOVERNANCE PROGRAMS. THE ONE PERCENT SET-ASIDE FOR AMERICAN INDIANS IN *AMERICORPS* CAN HELP INSPIRE THIS TIMELY NEW VISION FOR NATIVE YOUTH.**

AS A FORMER PROFESSIONAL ATHLETE IN THE NFL FOR ALMOST TWENTY YEARS, ONE OF MY FAVORITE MEMORIES WAS A MONDAY NIGHT

² *THE LIFESKILLS CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP* WAS RECENTLY RECOGNIZED WITH ITS FOUNDER, "FAMOUS DAVE" ANDERSON, WITH AN ANGEL AWARD ON *THE OPRAH WINDREY SHOW*.

FOOTBALL GAME AGAINST THE DENVER BRONCOS IN 1993 WHEN JOE MONTANA, MARCUS ALLEN AND MY OTHER KANSAS CITY TEAMMATES HELPED ME KICK 5 FIELDGOALS AND ALL 15 POINTS AS WE BEAT THE BRONCOS 15-7 THE DAY BEFORE PRESIDENT CLINTON SIGNED INTO LAW THE BILL THAT LAUNCHED *AMERICORPS*.

I APOLOGIZE TO THE ABLE SENATOR FROM THE GREAT STATE OF COLORADO, BUT THAT WAS ONE NIGHT I WILL NEVER FORGET! THE CREATION OF *AMERICORPS* THE NEXT DAY, HOWEVER, WAS EVEN MORE SIGNIFICANT IN ANOTHER WAY, BECAUSE IT MARKED A RENEWED CALL TO OUR YOUTH AS LEADERS IN COMMUNITIES. WHAT DRIVES ME TODAY, AND WHAT DRIVES THE OUTSTANDING INDIVIDUALS IN THIS ROOM LIKE J.R. COOK, IS THEIR LIFE-LONG COMMITMENT TO SEE THE DREAMS OF NATIVE YOUTH FULFILLED. THE SEVENTH GENERATION THAT MANY HAVE SPOKEN OF HAS INDEED ARRIVED: ARE WE READY FOR THEM?

SEVEN YEARS AGO, I HELPED FOUND *NATIVE VISION* WITH THE JOHNS HOPKINS CENTER FOR AMERICAN INDIAN HEALTH AND MY FRIEND CLARK GAINES OF THE NFL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION. JOHNS HOPKINS HAS SPENT 25 YEARS ATTACKING THE SYMPTOMS OF ILL-HEALTH ON RESERVATIONS – FROM DIABETES TO MENINGITIS, DEVELOPING THE WORLD RENOWNED ORAL REHYDRATION THERAPY THAT HAS LITERALLY SAVED THE LIVES OF MILLIONS. *NATIVE VISION* ADDED A MORE POSITIVE FOCUS ON YOUTH AND SPORTS, AND HEALTHY FAMILY LIFESTYLES. BUT WHILE IT HAS HAD SUCCESS, FOCUSING ON SYMPTOMS AND HEALTHY YOUTH AND FAMILIES IS ONLY PART OF THE ANSWER.

JUST AS FREUD HELPED US UNDERSTAND WHAT WERE THE COMPONENTS OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH, ABRAHAM MASLOW, THE FATHER OF MODERN

PSYCHOLOGY, HELPED US ASK ANOTHER EQUALLY IMPORTANT QUESTION: WHAT ARE THE QUALITIES OF THE HIGH ACHIEVING INDIVIDUAL? MR CHAIRMAN, WE MUST ASK THIS QUESTION NOW OF OUR YOUNG PEOPLE ~ *WHAT IS YOUR HIGHEST CAPACITY FOR GREATNESS?* WE MUST EVEN SHOUT IT, AND THEN WE MUST ***LISTEN***. WE MUST FINALLY GIVE YOUTH THE TRAINING AND THE POWER TO CALL ATTENTION TO ISSUES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

NATIVE CULTURE HAS MUCH THAT WE CAN LEARN FROM, SUCH AS THE NOTION OF THE WHOLENESS AND BALANCE OF HEALTH, SYMBOLIZED BY THE MEDICINE WHEEL. WE MUST NOW CONSIDER THE SYMPTOMS OF ILL-HEALTH AND WEIGH THEM AGAINST A NEW PARADIGM: *WHAT IS YOUR CAPACITY FOR A LEGACY OF MEANING AND CONTRIBUTION?* THEN WE MUST FOLLOW THROUGH WITH MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN REVITALIZING COMMUNITIES, THROUGH PROGRAMS SUCH AS *AMERICORPS* THAT PLACE YOUTH AT THE CENTER OF THE COMMUNITY'S DECISION-MAKING LIFE.

AT GILA RIVER, NEAR PHOENIX, ARIZONA, THE YOUTH COUNCIL HAS A PERMANENT VOICE IN THE LIFE OF THE COUNCIL, REPORTING TWICE A MONTH WITH ISSUES OF CONCERN AT ALL 7 DISTRICT MEETINGS. REGULAR TRAINING, ALLOWING THE YOUTH TO TAKE REAL OWNERSHIP IN RUNNING PROGRAMS, IS THE ESSENCE OF GILA RIVER'S TRUE EMPOWERMENT. MOST ADULTS DO NOT EQUIP THEIR STUDENTS WITH THE SKILLS TO RUN THEIR OWN PROGRAM, LET ALONE THE OPPORTUNITY. MY FRIEND, JR COOK WILL TELL YOU IT IS NO COINCIDENCE THAT A NUMBER OF THE TOP NATIONAL LEADERS FOR *UNITY* ARE FROM GILA RIVER. BECAUSE THEY POSSESS THE CONFIDENCE, THE VISION, THE ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS, AND IN SHORT, THE LEADERSHIP.

REALITIES:

DURING THIS YEAR'S *NATIVE VISION* PROGRAM, CLOSE TO 200 YOUTH FROM 25 TRIBES FROM 9 DIFFERENT STATES FILLED OUT QUESTIONNAIRES. THE GROUP WAS ROUGHLY 50% MALE AND FEMALE. GENERALLY SPEAKING, THEY WERE MORE MOTIVATED THAN THE AVERAGE YOUNG PERSON. EVEN SO, 50 % SAID THEY MISS SCHOOL 3 OR MORE TIMES PER MONTH. 50% SAID THEY ARE LATE FOR SCHOOL AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK. ONLY 23% SAID SICKNESS WAS THE REASON, WHILE CLOSE TO 80% SAID OVERSLEEPING, NOT WANTING TO GO, AND FAMILY ISSUES WERE AMONG THE REASONS. ONLY 2.3% SAID THAT THEY GO TO THE COMMUNITY CENTER AFTER SCHOOL. APPARENTLY, NOT ENOUGH VIEW THEIR COMMUNITY CENTER AS A SOURCE OF HOPE.

NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH ARE TAUGHT TOO OFTEN THAT THEIR PROBLEMS ARE HOPELESS. THEY ARE SO FREQUENTLY APPROACHED BY THOSE OUTSIDE AND INSIDE THE RES WHO SEEK TO HELP THEM WITH THEIR SO-CALLED ISSUES, THAT THEY BEGIN TO SEE THEMSELVES AS PROBLEMS. THEY SEE THE RESERVATION ONLY AS A SOURCE OF DESPAIR AND NOT OF GREATNESS AND VIBRANT, LIVING TRADITIONS AND CULTURE. PROFOUND NEW STEPS MUST BE TAKEN SO THAT YOUTH OWN THEIR OWN FUTURE: BOYS' AND GIRLS' CLUBS ON THE GILA RIVER RESERVATION IN ARIZONA AND THE WIND RIVER RESERVATION IN WYOMING, YMCA'S IN SIOUX COUNTRY, AND OTHER COMMUNITY CENTERS THROUGHOUT INDIAN COUNTRY TRULY MUST BECOME THE CENTERS OF LIFE ON THE RESERVATION FOR OUR YOUNG PEOPLE. THIS WILL ONLY HAPPEN BY RAISING THE SOCIAL VALUE OF YOUTH AND THEIR INITIATION INTO AN ADULT ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY. IT DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE, MR CHAIRMAN, THAT A SENATE COMMITTEE TAKES THE TIME TO UNDERSCORE THAT THIS IS AN IMPORTANT NEW PRIORITY.

WHAT WOULD YOUTH STUDY? BRIEFLY, THE HARVARD PROJECT'S SYSTEMATIC, COMPARATIVE RESEARCH SHOWS THAT ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIAN COUNTRY DEPEND ON CERTAIN KEY ELEMENTS:

- * **SOVEREIGNTY** - the right of Indian Nations to determine what happens on their lands and in their communities
- * **CAPABLE INSTITUTIONS OF SELF-GOVERNANCE** - the ability to manage power effectively and accountably
- * **CULTURAL MATCH** - a match between formal governing institutions and the informal traditions of how power is appropriately organized and exercised by the tribe
- * **STRATEGIC ORIENTATION** - a long-term plan and vision
- * **LEADERSHIP** - a set of persons able to articulate and inspire a realistic vision of the future, win support for that vision from the community, demonstrate public-spirited behavior, and inspire such behavior in others³

NATION BUILDING FOR NATIVE YOUTH IS THE FIRST ATTEMPT TO TRANSFORM THE HARVARD PROJECT'S MATURE NATION BUILDING PRINCIPLES INTO LESSONS TRANSPARENT FOR ADOLESCENTS. DEVELOPED AS A PILOT CURRICULUM AT HARVARD THIS PAST YEAR AND ADMINISTERED BY THE NICK LOWERY FOUNDATION WITH ASSISTANCE FROM THE KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE MASHANTUCKETT PEQUOT TRIBE, IT TEACHES SELF-GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP THROUGH A COMBINATION OF TRUST BUILDING EXERCISES, NATION BUILDING PRINCIPLES SUCH AS THOSE JUST MENTIONED, AND MOCK TRIBAL COUNCILS.

³ Cornell and Kalt, "Where's the Glue?" The Journal of Socio-Economics, December, 2000.

IN CONCLUSION, NATIVE YOUTH ARE INUNDATED BY OFTEN WELL-MEANING BUT MISDIRECTED MESSAGES FROM COMMUNITY PROGRAMS THAT AIM TO HELP THEM OUT WITH “THEIR PROBLEMS.” **YOUTH GROW UP BELIEVING THAT THEY ARE THE PROBLEM**, NOT THE ANSWER. THE ANSWER, MR CHAIRMAN, IS STARING AT EACH ONE OF US WHO SPENDS MORE THAN A MOMENT WORKING WITH YOUTH. WE MUST GIVE YOUTH A TASTE OF POWER, AND THE INSIGHT INTO HOW TO USE IT EFFECTIVELY. WE MUST REPAIR THE TEAR IN THE SOCIAL FABRIC THAT REPRESENTS THE YAWNING GAP BETWEEN THE AGES OF 11 AND 21, OR THE YEARS THAT COMPRISE COMING INTO ADULTHOOD, AND, BY DEFINITION, INTO MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP IN THE COMMUNITY. THE SINGLE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO DEVELOP A CYCLE THAT GENERATES GREATER SOCIAL CAPITAL IS BY ENGAGING YOUTH AT THE EARLIEST AGE IN THE PROBLEM SOLVING OF ITS COMMUNITY, **BY TEACHING INVOLVEMENT AND SERVICE AS THE HIGHEST VALUE**. IN SO DOING, AN EDUCATION SYSTEM UNLEASHES THE IMAGINATION AND ENERGY OF ITS TRUE CLIENTS, ITS STUDENTS.

IN THOSE COMMUNITIES IN INDIAN COUNTRY WHERE TEENAGE SUICIDE, SUBSTANCE ABUSE, ILLITERACY AND APATHY DANCE TOGETHER IN MORBID FASCINATION, THIS IS THE ONLY ANSWER. I CHALLENGE EVERY TRIBAL COUNCIL IN AMERICA TO CREATE WITHIN THEIR OWN COMMUNITY A MEANINGFUL, FULLY INTEGRATED ROLE FOR ITS YOUTH COUNCIL.

THANK YOU AGAIN, MR CHAIRMAN, FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE THESE THOUGHTS WITH YOU.